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A Grateful Marine's Journey through Navy Medicine

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U.S. Marine Capt. Matthew Kutilek on patrol in Southern Afghanistan shortly before sustaining massive injuries to one of his legs in an enemy firefight March 5, 2010.

By Captain Matthew Kutilek, U.S. Marine Corps

My interaction with Navy Medicine during my first eight years of service in the Marine Corps proved to be limited, uneventful and quite normal. An appointment here, sickness there, the birth of two healthy daughters over a span of two years and follow-on requisite visits proved to be the norm.

All of this medical normalcy suddenly changed during an intense firefight with enemy forces during a seemingly routine combat patrol in Southern Afghanistan on March 5, 2010. Overnight, Navy Medicine, which few people realize is also Marine Corps Medicine as we rely on our Navy medical care and services, became a daily fixture in my life, and a welcome

one at that.

An enemy sniper's bullet missed the intended target — the face of an alert Marine in the low kneeling position — and instead traveled five yards further and slammed into the inside portion of my lower right leg, the only portion of my leg exposed in a courtyard entryway.

Better my leg than his face, but nonetheless the effects were tremendous. Upon impact the high velocity bullet sent a violent concussion that reverberated throughout my leg. Instantaneously, every single major component of my leg was severely damaged.

There was an open compound fracture to my tibia, two of three arteries were severed, there was massive vascular damage, nine centimeters of my tibial nerve were totally destroyed and half of my calf muscle would be removed.

My unplanned exposure to Navy Medicine had begun.

The pain was instantaneous and excruciating, much greater than I could have ever imagined a single bullet could cause. The impact of the bullet and my adrenaline-induced reaction forced

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me backward into my company first sergeant and Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Hoang Thai, who along with my radio operator Cpl. Garret Baker, saved my life. “Doc” Thai, an experienced and knowledgeable corpsman who as a graduate of the Navy’s Tactical Combat Casualty Care course has skills that rival those of a well-trained civilian trauma nurse or even a doctor, quickly went to work by cutting the blood-soaked right trouser leg off.

He packed my wounds with curlex gauze while he verbally assured me everything was going to be alright and that he had everything under control. Most importantly, he applied a combat tourniquet to my upper thigh area, cinching it down tight enough to stop the unabated gushing of arterial blood.

All of these life-and-limb-saving actions were completed in a calm, cool and professional manner, while under fire in a potentially stressful environment less than thirty seconds after I was shot. Talk about putting your training to the ultimate test!

Needless to say my first in-depth exposure to real Navy Medicine was a resoundingly positive experience.

My corpsman’s actions that day initiated an 18-month immersion into Navy Medicine with repeated visits to vascular surgery, orthopedic surgery, pain management, neurology, physical therapy and even dermatology! The ridiculous amount of trauma caused by one solitary bullet has thus far resulted in a seven-week stay at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., 10 surgeries, 100-plus physical therapy appointments and countless follow-up appointments at five Navy hospitals in four states. In fact, I would consider myself an expert on the quality of care given to patients within Navy Medicine.

I can say unequivocally and without reservation that Navy Medicine, specifically the portion associated with traumatic injuries such as mine, and those of the countless Marines and Sailors injured in Afghanistan, is the best in the world. I consider what Navy doctors and surgeons have done to my leg nothing short of miraculous. For example, the tibial nerve graft performed by the short, humorous and unassuming plastic surgeon, Dr. Robert Howard was amazing!

Then there was the professional and systematic approach to pain management while I was under immense neuropathic pain led by Drs. Brown and Adams, and the professional mentorship and guidance on how to properly taper drug use provided by Dr. Jerry Foltz — outstanding!

And finally, the ridiculously difficult orthopedic surgery performed by the unique, funny and eccentric orthopedic trauma surgeon Dr. Robert Gaines, which involved removing an existing 16 in. plate on my tibia, sawing my tibia and fibula in half, rotating my lower leg 25 degrees outward, aligning all the bones up in my leg and hammering in a titanium nail the length of my tibia through the bone marrow 14 months after getting wounded — simply miraculous!

Indeed, it is impossible to properly acknowledge all of the phenomenal U.S. Navy Medical personnel who have had a life-changing positive impact on my life and that of my family. Needless to say, I am eternally grateful for Navy Medicine.

All of these major surgeries, as well as others not mentioned, and countless appointment and follow-ups through the recovery process were professionally, compassionately, meticulously and expertly performed by active-duty Navy doctors, their staffs and contracted DoD civilians. Their efforts equate to the best care in the world.

If you want to make me angry, say something stupid and uneducated like, “are you sure you want one of those Navy doctors to touch your leg and operate on you? You know there are civilian doctors that can do a much better job?” My reply is, No way! Not a chance! If you are

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not a Navy surgeon, doctor, nurse or corpsman then get away because these guys are the best!

Semper Fi,

Capt. Matthew Kutilek
United States Marine Corps

This article originally appeared as part of the [DoDLive](#) Medical Monday series.

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Medical Center Portsmouth, Va., following a complex surgery performed on Kutilek for injuries sustained during an enemy firefight in Afghanistan in March 2010.

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